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Transmediation in the Middle Years: Integrating picture books & process drama activities to enhance students' engagement with multimodal text

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Abstract:

This paper considers the efficacy of integrating picture books resources & process drama activities to enhance middle years students' engagement with multimodal text. While picture books & role play have not traditionally been seen as sophisticated resources & strategies for young adolescents, this paper suggests that they have much utility for engaging middle years students as code breakers, text participants, text users & text analysts (Luke & Freebody, 2000) of written, visual, oral & gestural texts. This paper involves readers in exploring the sophistication of picture book resources for young adolescents & working through a range of process drama activities. The workshop activities are based on the John Marsden & Shaun Tan (2003) allegory of colonisation, 'The Rabbits'. Specifically, 'attribute lists', 'sculptures', 'transformations', 'freeze frames' & 'conscious alley' activities will be introduced & analysed in terms of the literacy practice demands they make of middle years students.

Specialised Pedagogies for Specialised Years of Schooling

The notion of specialized pedagogies for middling schooling was a major point borne out by the Luke et al (2003) 'Beyond the Middle' report. The report drew on published literature & observations conducted in Queensland schools to conclude that when teachers attended to middle school students' learning style preferences, interests in their lives, used interesting texts & multiple modes of delivery, including group work, students' engagement with instructional tasks, their ability to showcase intertextual connections & self confidence increased. While Luke et al (2003, p. 111) reported that almost all of the schools they had visited had an 'energetic & dedicated focus on literacy', literacy plans & programs tended to be ad hoc. In these sites, teachers did not share a working definition of 'literacy' & the theoretical framework underpinning practice lacked consistency between classes, thus making it difficult for students to transfer literacy knowledge & skills from one classroom to another. A further complication noted was that interventions tended to be uncomplimentary (Luke et al, 2003, p. 113). This thus suggests that when classroom instruction is organized via a validated, consistent & complimentary theoretical framework there is an increased possibility that students' literacy engagement will be enhanced.

However, locating a validated, consistent & complimentary theoretical framework for literacy practice presents middle years teachers with a significant challenge. This is because no single 'one-size fits all' curriculum & pedagogy model for literacy teaching & learning exists. Rather, varied combinations of pedagogies & curricula have differential effects for different groups of students. Such understandings were emphatically reinforced in Luke & Freebody's (2000) theorisation of the practices of literate individuals, The Four Resources Model. This model, posited (and re-posited) by Allan Luke & Peter Freebody throughout the 1990s emphasised the need for teaching & learning to cover & integrate four broad repertoires of textual practices so that students could be competent literate participants in today's complex world. The

key concept of the model was that all four practices - code breaker, text participant, text user & text analyst - were necessary for literacy competency, but none in & of itself is sufficient. They concluded that effective teachers drew on a range of procedures to employ differing teaching approaches to work with different categories of students. Luke (1999, p. 6) contends that 'effective teachers know this & monitor the progress of their students in order to make appropriate adaptations'.

According to Luke (1999, p 4-5), rather than being obsessed with 'a single effective pedagogy', effective literacy education refers to repertoires of capability and to families of practices that allow learners to:

- **Break the code** by recognising & using fundamental features & architecture;
- **Participate in understanding text**, taking into account the text's interior meaning systems in relation to the available knowledge & the learner's experiences of other cultural discourses, texts & meaning systems;
- **Use text functionally** by traversing & negotiating the social relations around them – that is, by knowing about & acting on the different cultural & social functions that various texts perform, and understanding that these functions shape the way texts are structured, their tone, their degree of formality, & their sequence of components;
- **Critically analyse & transform texts** by acting on knowledge that texts are not ideologically natural or neutral – that they represent particular points of view while silencing others & influence people's ideas – and that their designs & discourses can be critiqued & redesigned in novel & hybrid ways.

This paper posits that integrating picture book resources & process drama strategies provide middle years students with distinct spaces for acquiring & practising the four practices of multimodal literacy in meaningful ways. To this end, this paper is presented in five sections: a discussion of picture books as sophisticated resources; the medium of process drama; transmediation within & between process drama strategies & picture book resources; an overview of five teaching & learning episodes; & in conclusion, an analysis of the literacy practices employed in the transmediation examples.

Picture Books as Sophisticated Resources

Throughout this paper I borrow Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson's (1999) definition of a picture book: a text whose message cannot be understood & enjoyed by engaging with the written text only; the illustrations must be understood & their meanings integrated with understandings of the written text. Picture books can be found in a range of literate genres that includes fiction, informational books, & poetry (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1999, p 68). Picture books are fundamentally different from 'illustrated texts', that is literary or non-literary texts with illustrations that accompany the written text (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 1999).

Picture books have been widely used in the early primary grade classrooms for many years. Graham (2000) suggests that these resources are 'simple vehicles' & useful as an entry point before students engage with more complex texts. Miller (1998) also suggests that picture books can be used as an introduction to topics, activate students' background knowledge & stimulate curiosity about subject matter. Whilst sharing the intended platitudes for these resources, I steer clear of labelling them as 'simple vehicles' or categorising them as resources for 'introductory' activities alone.

Also, as Miller (1998) exemplifies, some topics, such as History & Geography, are usually removed from students' familiar experiences & perspectives, & can thus be made more real for students by drawing in picture books as resources. However, Miller's (1998) descriptions of picture book resources & suggestions for classroom practice do not overtly explicate the sophistication of these multimodal texts. Moreover, Graham (2000) & Miller (1998) do not place picture books as the object of reading & viewing study. To gain the full benefit of these resources, students need overt instruction that prepares them for multimodal text engagement.

The use of sophisticated picture books for early adolescent audiences has become more wide spread in the past decade. Notable examples include:

- Crew, G. (2004) Beneath the Surface. Sydney, NSW: Hodder Headlines.
- Crew, G. & Tan, S. (1997) The Viewer. Port Melbourne, Victoria: Lothian Books.
- Crew, G. & Tan, S. (1999) Memorial. Port Melbourne, Victoria: Lothian Books.
- Egan, T. (1997) The Drover's Boy. Port Melbourne, Victoria: Lothian Books.
- Jorgenson, N. (2002) In Flanders' Field. Fremantle, Western Australia: Sandcastle Books.
- Marsden, J. & Tan, S. (2003). The Rabbits. South Melbourne: Lothian Books.
- Miller, D. (2003) Refugees. South Melbourne, Victoria: Lothian Books.
- Thompson, C. (2003) The Violin Man. Sydney, NSW: Hodder Headlines.

However, their use as resources & objects of study in the middle years has not been widespread. There has been a dearth of literature on their place in the middle school curriculum & the pedagogies for teaching such. This paper is an attempt to redress this gap, & moreover, outline some pedagogic strategies useful for resourcing students as visual & written code-breakers, text participants, text users & text analysts.

Process Drama as a Medium

In 1995 Heller (1995, p. 13) made the claim that drama activities help transform school from a place where teachers **tell students what to think** to a place where teachers **help them experience thinking**. Howell & Heap (2005, p. 59) describe process drama, more specifically, as a form of 'applied theatre in which participants, together with the teacher, constitute the theatrical ensemble & engage in drama to make meaning for themselves'. They are activities that are essentially improvised in nature, & take its form from the dramatic action, reaction & interaction of the participants within the process of an episode (Howell & Heap, 2005, p. 59-60). 'Participants in process drama will not normally be involved with learning & presenting lines from a pre-written dramatic text...but will be 'writing' their own play as the narrative & tensions of their drama unfold' in their own spaces & over time (Howell & Heap, 2001, p 7). An internal audience replaces the external audience of the theatre, so that the participants are **both** the theatrical ensemble that creates the 'play' & the audience that receives it. Put another way, process drama is recognised by practitioners as a form of theatre applied within a educational context in which learners, in collaboration with the teacher, create dramas for exploration, expression, & learning (Howell & Heap, 2005, p. 60).

Process drama is a means of making an otherwise abstract or unknown concept more concrete, accessible & relevant (Manna, 1996). Process drama is a medium whereby students can empathise with an experience in order to make sense of it. For example, students cannot have possibly experienced all historical moments that form

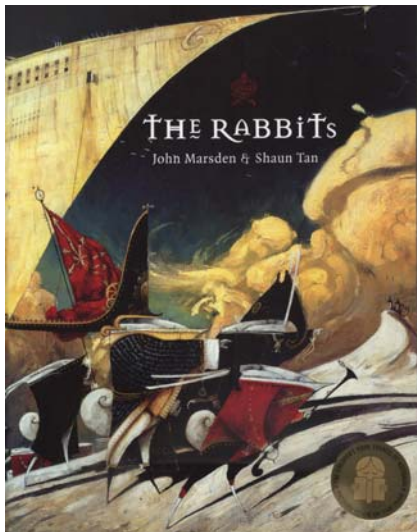
the content of study first hand. Nor can they become another cultural or social group, for such transformations of habitus might take a life time to acquire, if one can actually transform from a primary to a secondary habitus at all (see Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996). While students can read the accounts of many others, they can be given more powerful vicarious experiences in removed locations of time & space through the employment of process drama strategies. Such strategies permit students to enter different subject positions as created by the drama, explore the subtexts, that is, the thoughts behind the action, & thus better appreciate the lived experience of a range of others. Benefits of the subtext strategy include: making connections between students' lived experiences and those in the text under investigation; developing skills at inferring; moving beyond 'visualising' to becoming; & developing a deep understanding or empathy for participants from the target text (Clyde, 2003). When students are involved in process drama, they not only understand more about the complexities of the events, but they also forge stronger emotional connections to the content (Galda & West, 1995). Bolton (1985, p 155) also claims that when students collaborate on constructing & maintaining a dramatic event, the process can be a powerful classroom strategy for 'making personal meaning & gaining a sense of universal, abstract, social, moral & ethical concepts'.

This paper is also focused on what Solomon (1988) calls transmediation, that is the integration of interactions between texts. This paper focuses more specifically on transmediation between picture book resources & process drama strategies, that is, integration & movement between & within picture book resources & process drama strategies. The notion of transmediation as it applies to the activities presented in the paper is discussed in the next section.

Transmediation Between Picture Book Resources & Process Drama Strategies

In this part of the paper, I explain how transmediation between picture book resources & process drama strategies activates the four resources (Luke & Freebody, 2000) of oral, gestural, visual & written literacies. Wilhem's (1997) research has already shown that when struggling adolescent readers transmediate between process drama strategies & written texts, their understanding of texts, metacognitive awareness & insights into characterisation are heightened. Thus transmediation has already shown itself to be a potent means by which middle years students can deepen their content understandings & literacy resources. I suggest that it can also be an effective means for developing middle years students' oral, gestural, written & visual literacy perceptions & expressions. Transmediation is powerful because it requires students to understand an experience or event in one communication or sign system & then reconstruct that understanding in another communication or sign system. The range of strategies outlined in this paper commences with oral communication, integrates gestural communication, moves into reading written text & viewing visual text, then finishes with a return to gestural & oral communications. Specifically, the strategies introduced & outlined are: attribute lists, sculptures, transformations, freeze frames & conscious alley. The text under study is '*The Rabbits*', written by John Marsden & illustrated by Shaun Tan (see Figure One, below).

Figure One: Cover page of *'The Rabbits'*, written by John Marsden & illustrated by Shaun Tan



'The Rabbits' is described as a 'rich & haunting allegory for all ages, all cultures' (Marsden & Tan, 2003, back cover). Mortimer (1998, p 1) describes the story as an allegory that makes a 'powerful statement about colonisation in general & the colonisation of Australia in particular'. The five episodes of transmediation for middle years students are detailed in the next section, below.

The Five Episodes of Transmediation

Episode One

Attribute Lists: Making Available Students' Present Knowledge

Aim: Present, record & analyse students' different nominations of the attributes (ie. physical or personality characteristics) of the main participants in the text under examination. In the target text, *'The Rabbits'*, the main participants are possums, rabbits & soldiers. (The students haven't met the text yet. This is an introductory activity.)

Resources:

Slip of paper for making notes (one per students) & pencil (one per student)

Still or video camera (optional)

Blank flashcards (1 per student)

Pinboard, ribbon (or string), thumb tacks

Episode Plan:

1. Students to sit in a circle. Ask them to write down 5 attributes they think of when you say the word 'possum'. When they have written down five suggestions, they should stand as an indication they are ready to go on.
2. When all students are standing in the circle, invite them to nominate one attribute. If someone has said the one they were going to nominate, they have others on their list. Go around the circle so all students make a contribution. Draw attention to the differences in nominations. Some students may offer suggestions that construct possums as adorable while others may offer suggestions that construct possums as pests. Encourage students to think why people might have different views, ie the ideologies underpinning their social beliefs. The focus is on difference rather than what is supposedly right & wrong.

3. Go around the circle again so students can give the same nomination, but this time they also have to give some action or add some expression as they say the word. The focus this time is on using gestures & expression to add to meaning making.
4. Ready for the 'wave'...Go around the circle again. This time the students should be able to move quite quickly around the circle so their oral & gestural nominations flow in one continuous contribution. If you have access to a video or still camera, it is worth capturing the students' responses so they can see the images they have created.
5. Repeat for other major participants, ie. rabbits & soldiers. Allow all students to nominate attributes for all major participants.
6. An extension – record oral contributions on flash cards for students to arrange into a concept map. Use the ribbon to show a relationship between words. Students will have to decide on the categories of use & how words relate to one another. What is important is the way they talk about their thinking about the classification of these attributes. For example, students may construct clines (staircases of words that increase in intensity) or continuums.

Episode Two

Sculptures: Gestures for Creating & Observing Difference

Aim: Present, record & analyse students' different images of the major participants in the target text. In *'The Rabbits'*, the major participants are possums, rabbits & soldiers. (Students still haven't met the text. They are drawing on & presenting their current understandings.)

Resources: Still or video camera

Episode Plan:

1. Students work in pairs. One student in each pair becomes the lump of clay, whilst the other student instructs the lump of clay to take certain forms to create the image of a possum. Rather than 'touching' the lump of clay, instructions and/or demonstrations should be provided. Teacher moves from group to group, talking about what the sculptor wanted to achieve & what instructions they gave to achieve these outcomes. Photograph each statue as it is completed.
2. Students swap roles. Encourage students to think why people might have different views. The focus is on difference rather than what is 'right' or 'wrong'.
3. Return to original clay & sculptor roles. This time, the sculptor sculpts the lump of clay into an image of a rabbit. Swap roles & discuss differences.
4. Return to original clay & sculptor roles. This time, the sculptor sculpts the lump of clay into an image of a soldier. Swap roles & discuss differences.
5. Invite all students to sit in a circle. Call half a dozen students to the centre to undertake the 'transformations' activity. Count the students into a possum statue (Teacher to say: 3, 2, 1, & freeze). Walk around the possum statues, tapping individuals on the shoulder & inviting them to offer an oral nomination of a dominant attribute. Then count from 1 through to 10 very slowly & let the students transform into a rabbit statue. Repeat the walk & tap vocabulary exercise. Then through another 10 seconds of counting aloud, students transform into a soldier statue. Repeat the walk & tap vocabulary exercise.
6. Repeat step five so all students get to present their 'transformations' to the larger group. Again, consider the different ideological presentations.

Episode Three

Introduce the Visual & Verbal Text: 'The Rabbits' Written by John Marsden & Illustrated by Shaun Tan

Aim: Present, explore & respond to the written & visual texts in 'The Rabbits'.

Resources:

'The Rabbits', written by John Marsden & illustrated by Shaun Tan.

'The Rabbits' Teacher notes, written by Nancy Mortimer, available www.lothian.com.au

Episode Plan:

1. Read through the entire text unbroken to assist meaning making. Pause after each page so students have time to absorb the nuances of the visual text but at this stage do not make or invite comment. It is a short text, so can be read a number of times in the one episode.
2. Re-read the text, this time letting students nominate their understandings of the visual & written message.
3. Access the teacher notes prepared by Nancy Mortimer & available at www.lothian.com.au at no cost. Permission to photocopy. In these notes, Nancy raises numerous points for discussion, activities for middle years students, biographies of John Marsden & Shaun Tan, and excerpts of a conversation between Shaun Tan (Illustrator) and Nick Stathopoulos (Editor of magazine *Eidolon*).
4. Activities relating to illustrations include: commenting on the style of illustrations; the impact of colour; the depiction of desolation, destruction & despair; examining the way the invaders are depicted and how their image alters as the book progresses; listing the use of symbols throughout the text & the recurring themes in the illustrations; & understanding the contrasting of the endpapers with the remainder of the illustrations.
5. Activities relating to content include: discussing why the author has written about rabbits.

Episode Four

Freeze Frames: Creating a Scene & Articulating a Viewpoint

Aim: Present, record & analyse students' different interpretations of images & scenes from the target text.

Resources: Still & video camera

Episode Plan:

1. Re-read the target text, unbroken to assist with meaning making.
2. Students to form into groups of 5 or 6 & decide on a scene from the text to present as a freeze frame (or frozen photograph). Some students can become the main participants in the scene while others can become the props. For example, some students might become the large ocean going ship (pages 7 & 8) or the large design poster that shows the plan for the land (pages 9 & 10).
3. Each group presents their freeze frame to the larger group. Teacher counts students in (Teacher says, 3, 2, 1 & freeze). Students stay frozen & teacher & students walk around the constructed scene to view it & take photos from multiple angles (eg. low angle, high angle, distant shot, close up, extreme close up etc).
4. Students in the freeze frame continue to remain frozen. Rest of the students return to sitting in a large circle around the frozen scene. Teacher uses the walk & tap technique to bring each participant's or prop's subtext to the fore. This is the part of the episode that should be video taped for re-viewing & further discussion.
5. Repeat step 4 so all groups have an opportunity to present.

6. Document differences in dialogue. Discuss in terms of different ideological presentations & the way oral language & gestures can be used as persuasive communication devices.

Episode Five

Conscious Alley: Becoming a Participant & Maintaining a Stand

Aim: Present, record & analyse students' different viewpoints of incidents within the target text.

Resources: 1 'talk token' per student in the shape of the major participants from the target text (eg small cards in the shape of a possum, rabbit or soldier)

Video camera

Simple props to help students get into character (ie. some face markers for possum characters, a blazer for the Rabbit Boat General, meter rulers for rabbit soldiers etc)

Episode Plan:

1. Re-read the target text, unbroken to assist with meaning making.
2. Invite students to become one of the participants from the target text & take one 'talk token' that represents that participant's group. Make a range of simple props available to help the students get into character. Ask each student to specify their role, for example, they might become one of the stolen possum children floating in the white boxes (pages 21 & 22), a white rabbit who used 'modern' technology to build the new houses (pages 9 & 10), or a soldier rabbit who were part of the line up on page 16.
3. Raise an incident/provocation from the target text. Invite students to think about how their participant would respond to that incident & what their participant would say to another participant. Invite one of the students to walk down the alleyway (students in two lines facing each other). This is the part of the episode that can be videotaped. As the walking student moves down the alleyway, other participants take turns at stepping forward, presenting their 'talk token' & making a statement or asking a question about the nominated incident. For example, the General of the Rabbit Boat (pages 7 & 8) might walk down the alleyway. Possum characters might step forward, hand over their talk token & question: 'Couldn't you see we were already living on the land? We were waiting on the dune next to the shore? Why did you continue to take the land when we were already here?' Rabbit soldiers might step forward, offer over their 'talk token' & quiz the General about the lack of available infrastructure in this foreign land & their disturbance at having to kill off the original land owners (pages 15 & 16). The General responds to individual advances.
4. The teacher waits at the end of the alleyway to probe the walking student (out of role) about the tensions within their responses, the questions that were most difficult to respond to etc. Video these responses & play them back for general discussion.

Transmediation & the Four Resources of a Literacy User

The transmediation activities detailed above offer students full engagement with the four practices of literacy engagement. In theoretical terms, the five teaching & learning episodes detailed involve students in:

- **breaking the code of texts** through listening (episodes one & three) & viewing (episodes two & three) & in doing so, **working through the relationships between** oral, gestural, written & visual languages (episodes three, four & five) (see Freebody, 2004, p 6);

- **participating with oral, gestural, written & visual text**, that is, knowing the **meaning patterns operating within these different literacies**, including the stated & unstated patterns of information that holds the particular texts together (episodes one, two, three, four & five) (see Freebody, 2004, p 6);
- **knowing & using the social & cultural functions of oral & gestural texts**, including the form-function relationships & the socio-cultural, positional expectations between these texts & the written & visual texts (episodes one, two, three, four & five) (see Freebody, 2004, p 7)
- **exploring & making explicit the cultural & ideological bases on which texts are constructed, identifying alternative reading positions, & using text to constrain interpretation & influence other viewers or listeners** (episodes one, two, three, four & five) (see Freebody, 2004, p 7).

In conclusion, this paper has provided a principled foundation for literacy development that is purposefully differentiated for different groups of students as well as appropriately engaging for middle years students' literacy development. The students are starting with their individual lived experiences & a platform is provided for richly varied responses. This allows all students to make a clear personal connection to the content of study, as well as enhance their ability to make inferences & consider other viewpoints. The analysis of the employment of the four literacy practices of effective literacy users shows the depth & breath of the transmediation activities. The strength of the activities on offer are the way that students are encouraged to tap into all relevant resources & combine interpretations of oral, gestural, illustrative & written text with personal experiences & the differing viewpoints of others to construct deeper understandings of how texts work & also of the content of study.

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